

Josephine Yelder
Interviewed by David Kuroda
At her residence in Los Angeles
On September 13, 1993

---- Here at her residence on – is it Hubert?

YELDER: Yes, Hubert.

? Here in the Crenshaw District. Let me first ask you, Dr. Yelder, if you've been interviewed before by other organizations or for other articles or publications.

YELDER: I guess over time I have, though not in this kind of tape form. I've been interviewed quite a bit by students interested in what your background is and what you do – that sort of thing. In fact, one of them I remember was my son majoring in communications. I was his subject for a tv interview that was not too good.

? Was your interview actually broadcast on tv?

YELDER: They played it back as part of their school project. I've been involved in that kind of thing over time.

? If there are other interviews that are available, I think the archives would certainly be interested. They've been compiling those interviews together so that one day, when people want to know what happened in Los Angeles, they would have that information to look at.

YELDER: I know I have one or two that were done, particularly on television, that were related not so much to my personal experience, but to activities that seemed to be going on at that time. I hadn't even thought about the tapes in the past.

? As you know, you're on the board for the Social Welfare Archives. There's a lot of interest in being able to capture the history of social work. So much of history is really the history of people during this period. I'm wondering if we might start with how you happened to go into social work and what the factors were that led you to choose that as profession.

YELDER: In some ways it was what were the opportunities that happened to be available at the time. As a child, I grew up in the mid-west and came to California, went to UCLA. In those days, there was not a lot of recruitment for schools and applying to a lot of different colleges, and I came to UCLA because my mother had moved to California. Prior to that time, because of the Depression in the Midwest and the east coast, she had really kind of established a home for us. So I found myself, suddenly, at UCLA. I was very interested in anthropology and sociology, and I think my push, in those days, was for social action. The closest thing to anything that resembled social action was had to do with sociology. That's why I majored in sociology, not thinking necessarily of social work as I had experience it, but more in terms of the movement for change.

? What were some of the issues of the day that led to your interest in social action?

YELDER: One of the most critical things for me – remember, this was the time of World War II, with many kinds of things happening. The particular thing, I think, had a lot to do with segregation. In my own early experience, I had gone to a segregated elementary school, which was not necessarily a negative thing in Kansas. High school was integrated. As for the quality of the education, as far as I remember back, there were

no distinctions except that you might be put into a track or home economics. Fortunately, that did not happen to me because of my parents and my grandparents. When high school was over, there was a decided difference in job opportunities. Really the option was to go to college, and out of that, I was very aware of how segregation had created problems for people of color. I think that, along with World War II with a lot of changes, people moving around and just a lot of things were happening at that time. I don't think I was really astute as to all the problems, all the incidents that had occurred in the past. But I was just kind of brought up on the idea that people should push for their rights. The theme of that was that you should be educated. If you had a very good education, you might be prepared for job opportunities. That was the kind of climate at that time.

When I arrived at UCLA, people were very conscious of things like restricted covenants in California, which was very new to me and segregated eating places.

? Where was that?

YELDER: In California in 1942, '43. Those are the things that directed me towards an interest in social work and concern for people.

? So you personally experienced the segregation and the prejudice.

YELDER: Yes. Yes I had, and it was not a heavy amount. I was a fortunate person in having a minimum of that. Part of that was a protection from the family, having grown up in the middle west with recognition that you could accomplish whatever you wanted to in education. That was a plus, but I also was very aware of the other side. I was very conscious of, and didn't really understand, what had happened in California as a result of World War II and the Pearl Harbor issue and the relocation of Japanese families. At that time, I didn't know anybody, but I heard in the neighborhood – the community that I

lived in and moved, everybody talked about the loss and what had happened to people. So there were all these things stirring at that time. There was a very militant newspaper called the California Eagle that wrote – in fact, it was considered almost a Communist paper with a woman editor who wrote a lot about all these kinds of issues. I was very aware; I was surrounded in terms of community.

? So you had looked to education as a way of equipping yourself and empowering yourself to see what you could do. How does that degree in sociology – was it sociology?

YELDER: It was sociology. It was sociology with an emphasis, believe it or not, in social work. It talked about things like – the opportunity they talked about were places like the probation department, the Bureau of Public Assistance, the field of corrections, and just a little bit about something about community organization. It was not nearly as widespread or developed as we might have thought.

? Dr. Yelder, after graduation from UCLA, did you go directly into graduate school or did you work?

YELDER: I tried, should I say, to go to graduate school, and I guess as I think back over it, the lines of communication were rather interesting, because, I somehow found and learned about through advisement at UCLA about the School of Social Work. I graduated because I went to school continuously during those four years. I think I was 20 when I graduated. I wasn't sure I could even get a job in a public situation. All I knew is that I could take a test. I actually went over and applied to go to USC. I remember so vividly meeting Dr. Arlene Johnson in the School of Social Work, and the first thing she said was, "How old are you?" I said, "I'll be 21 in December." She said, "Go out and

get some experience.” So that was my interest, and I took her literally. From there I went down immediately and took an exam – I guess I had taken an exam – and I was called to work for LA County. As I said, my impression of what social work was all about was social action. I was not that aware of - I was not that knowledgeable about casework. I must say that some of this kind of evolved because I had a part-time job at the YMCA. It was during the War years and it was hard to find people to work, and I lived around the corner from the YMCA. It was through a friend of the director’s daughter that I got a job answering the telephone at the Y. That was my social agency first experience. That’s what they said when I got to LA County: “She doesn’t know anything about casework, but she has worked and she knows how to answer the telephone.”

? While you worked for LA County, what department or what program?

YELDER: In those days – it is now known as Department of Public Social Services. In those days it was known as the Bureau of Public Assistance. The office was located down on Santee Street. It was just a big kind of warehouse with floors. I remember going in to this interview, and the director was so busy, she said, “Just report tomorrow or come back for an interview.” I remember saying that I had to notify my employer, and that’s how I got my first job. I found myself the next morning sitting at a desk with some cases.

? You must have impressed her with something, because she hired you right on the spot like that.

YELDER: It wasn't me; it was the need for bodies to work. The demand for providing services and working for people, at that time, was very limited. Having a bachelor's degree was really considered useful.

? So this is now late 1940s?

YELDER: Mid '45. In fact, it was 1945. That's when I got my first job, and I worked at that job for about a year, taking a course at USC in social work. One was called Medical Information for Social Workers and the other had to do with Psychiatric Information for Social Workers.

? This was in the Graduate School?

YELDER: In the Graduate School of Social Work. I took these courses because you could take a class if you were working as a social worker, part time. The County at that time – it seems as I think back, Los Angeles County was very forward-looking in those times, and they had a stipend program. For a year of service, you could have a year of graduate work. I took my year of experience and re-applied to USC and got admitted as a first-year student. I completed my certificate, did my field work in LA County, working basically with families and children, and with that one-year certificate I came back to work.

? So Dean Johnson was the Dean of Social Work?

YELDER: She was the Dean at USC at the time.

? It was a one-year certificate program? The two-year.....

YELDER: They had the two-year master's, but by completing to the end of one year, you had your certificate. That's what I received, thinking that each year, after I paid back my year's commitment, I would go back to USC. I think it went up to – I think we had

five or six years to use those same courses to go on into the second year. Each time something else would happen. I got a different assignment: in fact, I became a supervisor in LA County, working with the General Relief and the Aid to Needy Children program.

? That's pretty impressive, because my guess is that there weren't very many black social workers let alone supervisors.

YELDER: There were very few, but I was very – it was a really – I always say Los Angeles is like a small town. The file that I re-learned my social work from – if there is anything like socialization, this really happened. The minister, the assistant pastor of our church, his wife was a social worker, working in LA County. When I came in as a new worker, I got her file. Not because someone said, “You know Mrs. Branham and you can't work it,” but that was the file that had to be opened because she got promoted to work in adoptions. She was a specialist in adoptions. That's kind of how I followed. But you're right. There were very few people of color at all. Interestingly enough, the people who did work there – there was a fair number – it was like an entry where there wasn't a bias. If you had a bachelor's degree, you could be hired. Remember, that was 1945, so there was still a boom of the War years, the job opportunities, and that sort of thing. So this made for a spot. It was really a training period place for probation. Some people went to probation and some people went into education from that.

? I used the work “black,” and you used the term, “person of color.” That's interesting. How do you see – do you see yourself – and I don't really know how to ask this – as a black social worker, an African-American social worker?

YELDER: I guess I see myself as a social worker who happens to be an African-American. I think that's how I'd have to define myself. I've always been involved. One

of the advantages of going to UCLA was being in a pretty diverse background. There were not a lot of blacks at UCLA. I was trying to think – and I knew absolutely no Latinos – Asians, I didn't know at all. Obviously, during the time that I matriculated – but in the County, there was diversity. After my first year, I had a unit of people, and we were the UN. I had people like Louise Yamasaki – I don't know whether you know Louise or not. Do you know Reverend Yamasaki who was a minister here for years?

? John Yamasaki?

YELDER: Yes, and she was in the unit. The unit clerk was from Hawaii and happened to be Chinese. The other unit clerk was black. I remember vividly there was a girl named Lutsky who was Jewish and a girl from Wisconsin who really kind of represented – I think she was either Swedish – and one girl that I don't really know except that she would have represented white America because she had a Southern accent. She used to come to me and say, "Miss J., they don't like me because I have a Southern accent. People don't like me because of that." But we were this unit, and we were all about the same age. We got in trouble from time to time because they felt we didn't follow all the things we were supposed to do, but it was a hard-working group. We got interested in each other in terms of our background and what we did and what we did. That was one of the high points in my work experience and probably why I use terms like "people of color," and that type of thing.

? One of the things that we look at is the early years on your first job and how your experiences affected the rest of your professional career. After that job, then, what was next for you?

YELDER: When I worked in LA County as a supervisor, I then went back to graduate school. I had my field experience with the VA.

? This was back at USC?

YELDER: Yes, at USC. That was about 1952. Interestingly enough, that was kind of the time when the government was offering – the federal government was offering stipends, but I happened to come in, at the time, when veterans were receiving the educational benefits. They had an additional number of credits because of their veterans' status. When I applied to USC, I also applied for a stipend from the VA and was told I would get one. When I arrived at VA, they said, "We were so sure you would get the money, but Congress has acted and they cut the allowances in half. There were two positions, so the veterans got the position."

? So because of his veteran status, points were added to the scores. While you may have been equally or perhaps better qualified, the additional points made him the person that was selected.

YELDER: Yes, he was selected. So I really ran into that as part of my whole educational experience. I was determined to get my degree, because I felt like I wanted to get beyond the Bureau of Public Assistance. Interestingly enough, the hardest part for me was that I just didn't have any money. I actually did my second year of graduate work living at home. I knew what it meant not to have any money to spend, because they were to take care of my tuition. Of course, tuition in those sounded tremendous, but I think we were paying something like maybe \$15 or \$20 per unit.

? That's quite a bit more than it was at UCLA.

YELDER: Yes, UCLA was what? Thirty dollars a semester? Yes, it was, it was. I guess USC went to \$10. But the interesting thing was I was so determined to complete that master's and that push for being trained and not being half at hand was very critical for me, plus, the other thing that was so important was that I was in a climate, even in a public agency which had been really bad-mouthed over the years, the people there were very encouraging about education. The supervisors I had – the people had a close tie with USC. There was a large training unit with that group. That climate was the thing that made all the difference in the world. I thought that as soon as I can get through that, I would leave the county.

Actually, when I returned, I moved into staff training. The difference in the feeling was that I could leave if I wanted to, but on the other hand, I was seeing more opportunities than I ever had.

? The new job was to provide training for social workers?

YELDER: Yes, social workers. I started with students, and the first program I was involved with, which was so interesting to me, was the undergraduate - having field experiences for undergraduate students from about five or six of the colleges in this area. Really, it was like an experiment. I don't think the graduate schools thought a lot of undergraduate social work training, but I became familiar with schools like Pepperdine, Cal State, which was just coming forth, Long Beach State was beginning to do things with an emphasis in social work. I went to Pomona College – all of the schools around this area – I was familiar with them. I said at that time, because I got married in 1954 – this was about 1956 or '57 – in fact, I was pregnant. I said, “Well, I know where my child is going to college. I can check all the schools.” I was looking at the undergraduate

experience. We had a program just for that. To me, that was really a turning point for many people.

I also had a unit of students from USC, students who were in fieldwork for LA County. Then, in that same period and around that time with that job, I organized, and we were part of a training – I guess you would call it a training institute, because in a six-month period, we had trained about 400 social workers. It was a continuous program. The person was in the program for 90 days, and they not only had classes and follow-up and some practical experience with a small caseload. It was revolutionary, so you know that did not last beyond that six-month period. But that made for – it was really a cutting edge for training and orientation. I was part of that whole project and coordinated that.

? You mentioned that was cutting edge, so that was pretty innovative at that time. Was it because the training was so intensive and it was really not so much the number of cases or the number of clients, but a few clients that you taught didn't just work.....

YELDER: That's right, that's right. The people really got more than how to fill out forms. That, too, was very different. During that same period, and kind of on the hope of that – around the Sixties, was the demonstration project with the State. The State was funding special kinds of programs, and I think that was really the height of trying to do things to improve services in the public setting.

? The public social service setting, the public welfare.

YELDER: Yes, that's right. It's in the public welfare setting, which seems unusual. The thing that I think back over in terms of that practice, in terms of supervision, was that we saw many people either decide they wanted no part of social work, and they moved

out of it, but we also saw people who really became involved and dedicated. If they didn't move into management and that type of thing, they did go on to graduate school. Many of those people we know around today, I have watched them grow. My whole thing was that I got really involved in education and training. That's how my career lines ran.

? You distinguished yourself in the profession as a teacher and trainer. Certainly, early on in your career, you were doing other things that you introduced as concepts in training at that time?

YELDER: Probably at that time, I couldn't say that I introduced the concepts, but I think that the thing I was a part of was the setting of the policy and programs that allowed for extensive training that developed. The thing that I really had an opportunity to do was to also be a part of some of the intensive training that was done by the State of California. That is, I worked with them. Interestingly enough, in the early Sixties, I moved from working for DPSS, as we were about to be called, to working for the State of California as a training consultant. I learned that through working in the division for the blind. I worked with a person who happened to be blind, and the summer assignment was to develop some programs and materials, and, I guess, mostly what I did during that early period – you asked what I did that was innovative – was that we did a training film with the State on interviewing.

? You mean it was a film like a movie?

YELDER: A film, a movie, which was actually done in coordination with a person from USC. We were both young mothers with kids about five years old. We didn't know what to do with our kids, so they became part of the film. They were in the waiting

room: it was called, “Techniques of Interviewing.” We actually had a waiting room, we used staff to act as clients, we had a script and it was done.

? So you used film and video as training?

YELDER: Yes, as training. This was old-fashioned filming. It was on one of these big old....

? Projector?

YELDER: Tapes and projectors, and we all – I laughed about that so, because you could see these kids moving in and out on the floor, and they were our kids, and that was our babysitting. That’s the way we looked after them. We did two films on working and interviewing in consultation with the State Department of Social Welfare, Department of Public Assistance and USC. The person who did this was a part of the faculty of the cinema department and USC. That was something that was different. It was very exciting and it was very creative. That was the first time I saw my name listed as Josephine Yelder, Consultant. Using visual material and doing non-traditional things, things other than lecturing, was really a part of my experience.

? That was 40 years before George Lucas (laughter), I guess. ????? cinema at USC.....

YELDER: Right, yes. She was doing some independent work and had gotten this contract with the state, and I was selected to work with her. As I moved to – left the County, I worked for the State. I had an interesting time in terms of – not so much contributing to policy, or whatever, but doing innovative things. One of the things that we did was, as I was hired by the State, I was supervised by USC School of Social Work. I had my unit in Pasadena, California. Students who came from all over California, who

wanted to go on to graduate school – this was done by the stipends provided by the State Department of Social Welfare. So there I engaged in supervising students in a county setting. That lasted for two or three years, and then one day when I got there, they said, “It’s over. The funds have been cut.”

From there, I got this call from Malcolm Stinson, from Los Angeles, from ‘SC, and he said, “I understand that your job is about to go.” I said, “It’s gone.” Then he said, “We would like to have you take over a child welfare unit, children unit ?????, and you would be on USC’s faculty.

? This would be the dean then that followed Dean Johnson, Dean Stinson?

YELDER: That’s right, yes, Dean Stinson. What we set up was that program. I had been a part of it, because it was in Pasadena, so I got to know him through the students that we had from the State. He maneuvered this contract we had which was State, County and USC. I got the appointment through the Children’s Bureau, Annie Lee Sandusky, who was a very well known woman in child welfare. June Brown and I had heard her years before when we were workers. We just went to see her. We kept the unit in Pasadena, and the thing that I felt most innovative about was developing the concept of a fieldwork center, so that all the agencies, the students who were placed in Pasadena, I worked with as a liaison person. We had partly non-agency, unstructured experience in fieldwork. That allowed them to see what was going on in the community to look at certain kinds of issues and projects that were not a part of the traditional, child-guidance DPSS, YWCA programs. One of those was to look at groups who were underserved. One happened to be a Spanish-speaking group that lived – they were invisible. In those days, there were no Spanish-speaking people to speak of in Pasadena in those days.

Turns out that working with these mothers, the students got a chance to help them get in touch with some services at the YMCA, and we did a project on the north end with Backyard Mothers, mothers whose houses and streets didn't look too good, but they were organized. We had the Junior Leaguers come and help them clean up and change the community, and also, the mothers had their children supervised. Those were really innovative projects that you could not have done under strictly public monies like the Public Assistance. With the school involved, that was started. I was part of the first group of what they called "clinical social work." I was called a clinical professor of social work, which was a fancy name for fieldwork.

KURODA: So that may have been the first time social workers were referred to as "clinical social workers."

YELDER: I don't know that it was – I think in private practice and in the private agencies, they used this term. They were trying to find a term that would distinguish us from the regular faculty. I had a faculty appointment, which I thought was really unusual, but that's what the government required. That was one of those innovative things that I was involved in.

When I go back over this, I think, "Now this happened in the Sixties, and here I was in the Seventies, and I had been there seven years. If you're an assistant professor, you either get promoted up or out. That was a turning time when social work began to think they should have people on our faculty with doctorates. I had audited the doctoral classes and made a decision that I would go back to school. So see, this is the third time: certificate, master's, and then I went back in 1970...."

KURODA: Is this back to USC?

YELDER: I was going to USC, but they had not established their

KURODA: DSW program?

YELDER: Yes, DSW program. When I went to USC for my master's program, they had not established a master's program. Each time – in fact, I actually wrote a letter to UCLA asking when they would start a master's program.

KURODA: Before they had one.

YELDER: Before they had one.

(they speak together – can't get this sentence)

YELDER: I like to think that, but my loyalty moved over to USC. Again, this whole pattern of when you don't have many resources, and you are dependent on how are you going to pay for this. Here I am now with two children. My husband is working – he worked for the government at the post office for many years – and here I am with this newfangled USC tuition, facing it. I said, "I would love to go to school, but I have only limited means for going to graduate school." And that's how I got into aging: they offered stipends for aging. My field had been family and child welfare.

KURODA: You were ready to go back and get your doctorate, but the reality was such that you didn't have the money, and USC's tuition was going up even more.

YELDER: It had gone crazy, but through the School of Social Work and the gerontology program, at that time, there was – Barbara Solomon had a joint appointment with them, and she was the chairperson of my dissertation committee. I took courses in aging. That was the one thing that contributed to my growth and that kept me away from feeling – what's a good word? – so incestuous that I'm talking to same people again for the third times around in terms of teachers. I did take a number of courses at the Andrus

Gerontology Center. I focused my research – it was more on behavior than on clinical practice – looking at generational relationships in the black family. That was a culmination of a whole lifetime of work and experience.

Again, I got through all the courses and all of that, and I no longer have a job. At that period, USC had been notorious for hiring its own. Just about everybody who got a doctorate, got on the faculty.

KURODA: This was when? The Sixties?

YELDER: This was the Seventies. I completed my work in 1975. It took me five years to get through the whole thing. I got a job at Pepperdine in 1973, teaching full time. They had an undergraduate social work program, and they thought they might like a graduate program. That was just prior to the time that they decided they had better desert the inner city and went to Malibu. So those plans went down the tubes, but it gave me a job and a good experience in what I would look at as working with undergraduates in sociology with a social work emphasis. I became kind of a recruitment base for people going into graduate school in social work. I taught – and this is where I put the emphasis, based on my background in aging and also the focus on the black family that I was able to develop courses, and really got much more involved in multi-cultural education. So that's the whole cycle of what my education was like and what my career was like. It was a mixture.

As I look back over it, I'm glad I didn't go through taking things course by course, finishing your education, then having a career, then having a family. They're all laced together like a cafeteria line where you can pick up whatever you needed as you went along. So that's been what my experience has been.

KURODA: There's a question that I have that's probably more about you than about the profession. Many people follow along with what others have set forth, but it sounds like in the course of your social work career, you have been creative and innovative, for example, the issue of your films. What do you think of your own background or training, perhaps, led you to be able to be creative and innovative like that?

YELDER: I think probably I would relate that to family, family interest, support and that there was always something of that in the family, as I know it. I'm thinking of my grandmother who brought her two little girls and followed her family to Kansas. My mother probably told you about that. I guess her level of education would have been about the third grade, but she was able to be involved. She worked for a family and was able to do things that were creative. If you didn't have something, you found innovative ways to put it together.

KURODA: This is your grandmother?

YELDER: My grandmother. That's whom I spent a lot of time with. I remember watching her as she did things. She didn't read that much, but she could look at something and do something with whatever she had. Sitting here in the living room – I had some confusion, but these chairs belonged to her, and she covered them until we brought them out here. She would do that kind of work. I was around a person like that. My mother, who went to college, was in home economics and taught home economics during the time of the Depression, as I understand it, and as she came out here, the time that she worked, she was able to do something that made it special. The jobs were never

looked upon as demeaning. They did not make you a demeaned person. You made the job more exciting, and I think that's part of what influenced me a lot.

KURODA: It's impressive that your mother, who is now 88, went to college.

YELDER: She went to college.

KURODA: This was when? Was it the Forties?

YELDER: The Twenties. She went to school in the Twenties. My father – I found when I went back to Kansas – although my parents were not together not long after I was born, my father was an educator and taught school in the South. During the USO period during World War II, he was an entertainer. I found his yearbook. He finished high school in 1920, and in this book are all the students whose last name – my name was Jordan – everybody who is in the book – but he's at the back of the book with three black men who graduated from high school, and they're all at the end of the book.

KURODA: Why? Why should Jordan be at the back of the book?

YELDER: Well, because he was black.

KURODA: What state was this?

YELDER: This was Kansas, in Kansas, back in 1920, '21. I got this from my cousins on the paternal side of the family. They had kept a lot of records and things, so they gave me this book. That was one of the things that I saw. That was part of the other thing that contributed. We didn't have money, but there was a lot of aspiration for achievement, a lot of support. I would say on both sides of the family that was occurring. It was a critical kind of thing. It was the encouragement of the community.

The first scholarship I got was from a little town in Kansas from the women's bridge club. It was \$35 and that was a lot of money to go to school. My church was

responsible for my getting money here for a scholarship. So I think it was that kind of support from family and community.

KURODA: You're a very modest person. Rather than saying, "I did this all myself," you give credit to others who have ????. It sounds like clearly education has been very, very important for you, for your parents and your grandparents. That certainly has resulted in tremendous changes that you've helped been about.

YELDER: It's been an exciting time to be alive and to look at these experiences. In talking with my children, we were commenting about – oh, this was a few years back – they were a part of Friendship Day Camp and some of the other groups, and we talked about why we have a lot of friends who are from different ethnic backgrounds, and I asked them how did they come about. They said, "You never did tell us that we had to be friends with certain people, but we just saw a lot of people around." It was more like what they observed us doing, and my husband was the same way in terms of his being involved with people. That's been a very positive....

KURODA: We're going to wrap this first part up at this time. It's been real gratifying to hear how you, the person, have become – I guess the influences that have led to this whole ????? What we'll do the next time, is talk more about policies and other issues and changes that you have seen and helped bring about.

YELDER: Okay. We'll need to – I'll have to think about that a little bit, in terms of structuring and all. Have we used up an hour already? That went fast. You may want to listen to that and cull out some things.

END OF TAPE